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AUTHOR Reynolds, Mary Ruth; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Case studies of focus groups as a useful educational research strategy for evaluating noninstructional interventions are described. Focus groups were used to evaluate the effectiveness of programs in the following Virginia school settings: (1) peer counseling programs in 4 high schools with 49 student counselors; (2) gifted programs in 7 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and 1 high school; and (3) child-constructed story playing in 6 kindergarten classroom play centers. Data analysis included interpretation of themes according to the model of A. Strauss and J. Corbin (1990). Peer counseling evaluation included evaluability assessment, accountability, effectiveness analysis, and impact analysis. Analysis of gifted programs resulted in thematic analysis of problems and solutions suggested by students, parents, and teachers. Exploring the narrative competence of the kindergartners through focus groups allowed multiple perspectives of child-constructed stories in the classroom play centers. In these case studies, data supported the use of focus groups as a versatile, systematic research strategy. Effectiveness was demonstrated for informal evaluation of noninstructional interventions in school settings. (Contains two tables and eight references.) (Author/SLD)

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Focus Groups for Informal Evaluation of Non-instructional Interventions

Mary Ruth Reynolds
State University of West Georgia, Carrollton

Jim C. Fortune & Terri Street
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Blacksburg

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Abstract

This paper describes case studies of focus groups as a useful educational research strategy for informally evaluating non-instructional interventions. It gives details of evaluative research in three Virginia school settings. Focus groups were used to evaluate the effectiveness of:

(1) peer counseling programs in four high schools where 49 student counselors responded;

(2) gifted programs in seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school where student, parent, and teacher views were compared; and

(3) child-constructed "story-playing" in six kindergarten classroom play centers.

Data analysis included interpretation of themes according to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) model. Peer counseling evaluation included the following components: (a) evaluability assessment; (b) accountability; (c) effectiveness analysis; and (d) impact analysis. Gifted programs evaluations resulted in thematic analysis of problems and solutions suggested by students, parents, and teachers. Exploring kindergartners' narrative competence was the purpose of six child and two adult focus groups allowing multiple perspectives of child-constructed stories in classroom play centers. In these cases, data supported the use of focus groups as a versatile, systematic research strategy. Effectiveness was demonstrated for informal evaluation of non-instructional interventions in school settings.

Focus Groups for Informal Evaluation of Non-instructional Interventions

Focus groups, often useful to the marketing community, are reported by recent researchers to serve versatile purposes in education also (Reynolds & Fortune, 1995). They offer an amount of control in organizing ideas, "focusing" information within a group context and an interactive format (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). Focus groups provide a systematic approach to data gathering which may be applied to a variety of situations, such as: multicultural, multi-age, or potentially conflictual settings where opposing views may exist about sensitive issues.

This paper documents three cases of focus group research for informal evaluation of interventions in school settings in Virginia. Our studies demonstrated that focus groups offered a practical forum for data gathering related to the effectiveness of:

1. peer counseling programs in four high school where 49 student counselors responded;
2. gifted programs where student, parent, and teacher views were compared at seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school; and
3. child-constructed "story-playing" in six kindergarten classroom play centers.

Table 1 illustrates the applicability of focus group methodology to informal evaluations in educational settings. It offers descriptive comparisons of the three cases.

Peer Counseling Programs

An evaluation of a peer counseling program in four Virginia high schools was designed to communicate information for school and community mental health officials who requested data of program effectiveness. Focus groups were used for assessing the views of 49 peer counselors who volunteered to participate. Research design consisted of four components: (a) evaluability assessment, (b) accountability, (c) effectiveness analysis, and (d) impact analysis.

Evaluability assessment. Evaluability assessment involved the ascertainment of the consistency of program objectives as perceived by student counselors in addition to staff. Objectives of the program could then be reviewed by researchers and revised by staff who agreed to include student information. Agreement of goals was found among students and staff.

Accountability. Accountability dealt with documentation of details of the program such as: record keeping of up-to-date, accurate information of counseling opportunities, topics, numbers of clients, and expenditures. Student diaries were suggested as an effective means of counselor recordkeeping. Staff records appeared well-documented concerning finances and programmatic participants.

Effectiveness analysis. Effectiveness analysis was concerned with perceived effectiveness by counselors. No verifications from clients were possible. Based upon a questionnaire completed by counselors who attended the focus groups, 36, or 75%, of the peer counselors reported they were able to help their clients.

Impact analysis. Impact analysis related to self reporting of perceived impact by a small sample of counselors who responded. One example of impact was: helping to "break up" a suicide pact in their school. Impact was judged by whether sponsors reported similar perceptions of incidents reported by counselors.

Generally, a compilation of all four components supplied the sponsoring agency, schools, and counselors with useful information to review the peer counseling programs at four Virginia high schools. Due to the focus group data, staff were able to consider student opinion along with other means of documentation as they evaluated the effectiveness of program goals and revised them for future improvements.

Gifted Programs

Focus groups were used in a study to compare opinions of parents and school staff involved with gifted programs in seven elementary, two middle, and one high school in a Virginia school district. By combining parents and school personnel within groups, there was an opportunity for acceptance of diverse opinions which were potentially conflictual. The conscious attempt to provide opportunities for expression of differing views is a research challenge in which benefits are perceived to outweigh difficulties. However, special training in conflict resolution may be necessary for facilitators, depending upon the sensitive nature of topics or programs to be evaluated.

Child-Constructed "Story-playing"

Focus groups were used for informal evaluation and comparison of views of teachers, children and researcher about play in kindergarten classrooms. The researcher explored the process of kindergarten children's story construction, or "story-playing" (Reynolds, 1994) by combining videotaping with focus group methodology. Focus group interviews were conducted with nine teachers and aides as well as with 31 children in groups of four to seven who volunteered to participate. The child sample was self-selected according to those who chose to play in the housekeeping center during each of the six videotaping sessions. A unique feature of the study was that children were invited to view themselves to elicit discussion of their story playing. Thus, focus group methodology created an opportunity to compare teacher, child, and researcher perspectives of a shared classroom play event.

From the children's discussion, an interesting problem was created regarding ethics in research. It became apparent that all children wanted to be videotaped. Thus, the study was modified to include opportunities for all classes to be taped and viewed by all kindergarten children whose parents provided permission. For focus group researchers, then, is the important implication of flexibility due to the need to attend to immediate participant feedback. Focus groups offer opportunities to enlarge researcher views and to expand design around concerns of the researched.

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Data Analysis

Focus group data in all cases were analyzed according to strategies which included constructing themes from coding of participant comments. General categories were developed according to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) qualitative paradigm. Table 2 illustrates the steps involved in the process of data analysis.

Summary

Each case served to illustrate well the importance of focus groups for informal evaluation of non-instructional interventions in school settings. In peer counseling programs, staff were able to include opinions of student counselors who might not have been represented without the effective interaction offered by the focus groups. In evaluation of gifted programs, use of the focus group made possible the deliberate structuring of opportunities for gathering diverse views about potentially conflictual topics. Parents and teachers were intentionally grouped so that they could learn from each other in order to strengthen the program evaluation effort. In classroom play research, focus groups were combined with videotaping in an innovative way to allow children to respond to viewing their own play. Teacher and researcher perspectives were constructed to be compared with children's identified and implied purposes of story construction.

Therefore, focus groups presented to us a variety of research applications to enhance informal evaluations of non-instructional

interventions within school settings. We posit, from our recent experiences with a variety of participant/researcher interactions, that focus groups offer ever-new perspectives and possible solutions to many of the complex issues addressed by classroom research.

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Table 1

Applicability of Focus Group Methodology

to informal evaqluations in educational settings.

Purpose	Researcher Roles	Method of Data Collection	Model	Condi-tions	Number in Group
Informal Eval. of peer counseling programs	Investi-gative	audio taping	student counselrs	four VA high schools	49
Informal Eval. of gifted programs	Investi-gative	audio taping	parents & teachers of gifted students	seven VA elem,two middle & one high school	90
Informal Eval. of childrens story-playing	Investi-gative participant, co-player	video taping	teachrs & aides kinder-garten students	six VA Kinder-garten classes	9 adults 31 children

Table 2

Steps in Process of Thematic Analysis of Focus Group Data

Organization of Data	Transcription of Tapes
Review Transcripts	Researcher(s) code perceptions
Formation of Analysis	Driven by Group Membership Responses to Research Q's
Collaboration	Researcher comparisons-notes
Report Writing	Conclusions/Recommendations
Follow-up to conclusions	Development of New Research Ideas
Conduct Focus Group Models	Modify research by new themes